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SUBJECT: NEW FOREIGN MINISTER TZIPI LIVNI

1. Summary: Alternate Prime Minister Ehud Olmert named Kadima MK Tzipi Livni, who continues to hold the Justice and Immigration portfolios, to head the Ministry of Foreign Affairs upon the departure of Likud Minister Silvan Shalom. This decision, which the cabinet approved on January 18 (septel), suggests that Livni has cemented her status as a rising star within the Kadima party. End Summary.

LAWYER, SOLDIER, SPY

2. At 47, Livni, whose background includes law studies and a stint with the Mossad, also boasts serious ministerial experience at the helm of the Ministry of Justice and Immigration. The youngest of three children, Livni was born and raised in Tel Aviv. Her father, Eitan Livni, had been the operations chief of the pre-state Jewish underground Irgun Zvai Leumi [IZL]. Tzipi Livni rose to the rank of lieutenant in the IDF and, upon her discharge, took up law studies at Bar Ilan University, where former classmate and eventual law partner Avi Drexler recalls that her "straight thinking" made her stand out. Friends remember her as a flamboyant red-head "always surrounded by a group of highly-spirited young people," so it was a surprise to many to discover years later that at least one year of her studies was spent abroad as an employee of the Mossad, which employed her from 1980-84 according to her official resume.

3. In 1983, Livni returned to Bar Ilan University and completed her legal studies before embarking on a legal internship with the law practice of Attorney Nachum Feinberg, where her systematic approach and reliability is still lauded. Former left-wing member of Knesset Me'ir Pail remembers debating Livni's father, a Likud MK in the 1984 election campaign, and finding himself engaged in a memorable ideological debate with his debating rival's daughter, Tzipi Livni, who couldn't restrain herself from joining in. Pa'il says he liked her argumentation and eloquence and afterwards he told her "Why is your father hiding you? You could be one hell of a politician...."

LIVNI LAUNCHED A SECOND CAREER IN POLITICS IN 1995

4. Tzipi Livni's response to Pa'il's rhetorical question would wait for more than a decade. In the interim she and a friend from student days set up their own law firm and Livni married Naftali Spitzer, an accountant with whom she has two sons. Her decision to enter politics came in the fall of 1995, only a few weeks before the assassination of PM Yitzhak Rabin at the height of the Oslo accords euphoria. Livni contested a place on the Likud list, coming in at number 36, which proved too low for entry into the Knesset, but she was swiftly appointed by then-PM Netanyahu to head the Companies Authority, spearheading his plans for privatization of government owned companies. Israel's current Ambassador to the UN, Dan Gillerman, at that time head of the Union of Chambers of Commerce, recalls Livni as someone who knew how to make effective decisions. Gad Yaakobi, a former chairman of the Israel Electric Company, says he was impressed that she argued for a slowdown in the privatization process, against Netanyahu's view, thus proving that she was an independent thinker.

LIKUD MK IN 1999, LIVNI EMERGES AS A KEY SHARON LOYALIST

5. Contesting the Likud primaries in 1999, Livni came in at number 18, barely squeezing into the Knesset where Likud was in opposition after its defeat by Barak's "One Israel." As an unknown MK, she made it her priority to travel the length and breadth of Israel familiarizing herself with the country and the people. When, in 2001, Likud fought its way back into government, Livni demanded the Regional Development Ministry that had been created by former PM Ehud Barak for Shimon Peres. Livni got her wish and the post gave her new and valuable exposure to key issues in the Israeli-Palestinian context. She served as minister in this short-lived ministry from March-August 2001 then as minister of agriculture and rural development from December 2002 through February 2003. When PM Sharon formed his second government in February 2003, Livni became minister of Immigrant Absorption.

MULTIPLE MINISTRIES UNDER SUCCESSIVE SHARON GOVERNMENTS

16. Ariel Sharon did not know Tzipi Livni when she first entered the Knesset in 1999, but her 18 months in parliamentary opposition brought her to the Prime Minister's attention. Colleagues in the Likud faction say they noticed that when Livni spoke at faction meetings, Sharon listened. Interviewed by Ma'ariv newspaper, a senior Likud official described the relationship between Livni and Sharon as "a special bond" created by loyalty, adding that in the past four years, he could not recall a single instance in which Livni had spoken out against Sharon. Her loyalty was particularly evident during the elaboration of Sharon's disengagement plan when Livni was tasked with arbitration between the government and settlers who were to be evacuated. She earned the respect of settlers and their rabbis in an arduous and often combative process to reach a workable compromise. That loyalty was rewarded with the post of justice minister in January 2005.

17. Officials at the Justice Ministry are quoted by media sources as saying Livni has tackled her mission with energy and unprecedented independence, standing firm against the highest level of the judiciary on such controversial issues as the appointment of judges to the Supreme Court. But in her earlier post, as minister of housing and construction from August 2004 until January 2005, she failed to respond to inquiries into ministry investments in unauthorized outposts in the West Bank. In the words of Talia Sasson, who chaired the commission established by the office of Prime Minister Sharon to look into the issue of outposts, "It was only by the end of January 2005 that the Ministry of Construction & Housing responded to my request for data concerning investments by the ministry in unauthorized outposts over the last four years. This was only after correspondence starting September 2004, oral and written requests, reminders, an appeal to Minister Ms. Livni, her personal interference and demand to release the material - all of which was in vain."

MORE OUTSPOKEN ON OUTPOSTS UNDER OLMERT

18. Within the transitional government of Alternate PM Olmert, Livni has begun to speak out more forcefully on sensitive political and security issues such as outposts. Echoing Olmert's January 18 call on Israeli defense and security forces to evacuate illegal outposts (septel), Livni stated: "A battle is taking place between the government and the settlers on the issue of who is sovereign in Judea and Samaria. It is an ideological controversy on the right of the state and its laws, an attempt is being made here to delegitimize the state and the government."

OLMERT'S PICK FOR FOREIGN MINISTER

19. Among the assets that Livni bestows upon a Kadima-led transitional government are youth, pragmatism, a political lineage, and impeccable credentials. Livni combines a liberal image and understanding of human rights with a conservative insistence on the Jewish character of the state. Her support for the roadmap and territorial compromise is not ideological, but pragmatically driven by a commitment to preserving the Jewish character of Israel. Her loyalty to Sharon is matched by her dedication to her work and the ambition to succeed. Considered too young to be Sharon's number two in Kadima -- that position has fallen to Alternate PM Olmert -- Livni had been mentioned as a possible candidate for a number of key ministerial portfolios recently vacated by departing Likud ministers. On January 15, Olmert announced that Livni was his pick to succeed Silvan Shalom as Foreign Minister. Olmert's Kadima-led cabinet approved this decision on January 18, and the MFA en masse welcomed her to work that day.

PERSONAL DETAILS

110. Livni is a vegetarian and keeps kosher, according to government protocol contacts. A recent in-depth media profile in Ma'ariv newspaper indicates that while she is a hard worker, she also enjoys singing and dancing. Her spoken English is impeccable, and she has studied in France.